

TENSIONS BETWEEN AMBITION AND REALITY IN UK COMBINED ARTS FESTIVAL PROGRAMMING: CASE STUDY OF THE LICHFIELD FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT

The research presented examines the contradiction between reality and the expressed goals of many local combined arts festivals in the UK. Combined arts festivals are defined as those containing more than one genre of arts, e.g., Edinburgh International Festival. It is argued by some scholars and practitioners in the cultural field that there is now more pressure for the arts generally and combined arts festivals specifically to fit in to place-based economic and tourism strategies. Increasingly, festival organizers feel they must justify their funding by contributing quantifiable results to the community. A case study of the Lichfield Festival will illustrate these issues. Methodology for the broader research undertaken includes a survey sent to 117 UK combined arts festival organizers to discern audience demographics, programming, funding and future plans. In-depth interviews were conducted with Arts Councils, regional arts organizations, city officials, festival organizers and sponsors. Methods for the case study include in-depth interviews with the festival director of the Lichfield Festival at the time and local tourism officials, as well as participant and direct observation of the festival. Findings suggest that the increasing economic-centric perspective is one of the reasons for the increasing standardisation and homogenisation of combined arts festival programming across the UK.

KEYWORDS

Festivals, Cultural Economy, Arts Funding, Programming

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, festivals of all kinds have become subject to a number of external pressures in order to receive funding to continue from one year to the next (Mirza, 2006). One of the main ways in which these festivals are measured in the UK is by their contributions to local economies. This emphasis on the economic can be seen to have had a direct impact on festival organisation, objectives and outcomes (Caust, 2003).

This increasing emphasis on cultural economy in the UK has had indirect impacts on 'combined arts' festivals (Finkel, 2006). Combined arts festivals are defined by the Arts Council as those containing more than one genre of artistic performance, i.e., music, drama and visual arts events, as opposed to those presenting events in only a

single genre of arts, such as film festivals (Casey, Dunlop & Selwood, 1996, p.93). Although few combined arts festivals generate a profit or could be considered part of the cultural industries (as many are run by volunteers or local councils), there has been increasing pressure from government and arts organisations for combined arts festivals to fit in to place-based economic and tourism strategies (Belfiore, 2004; Bennett, 1995; Brighton, 2006; Griffiths, 1993; Holden, 2004; Mirza, 2006). Often, festival organizers feel they must justify themselves to local officials by contributing quantifiable results to the community, as opposed to relying on their less tangible contributions of developing civic pride and arts appreciation and education (Blair & Wallman, 2001). The ambition to be better known and to attract diverse audiences and tourists is a refrain heard throughout the

combined arts festival world. Only a handful of combined arts festivals actually manage to achieve this goal. Two examples of this kind of best practice are the Edinburgh and Aldeburgh festivals. (Gratton & Taylor, 1995).

It is argued by some scholars and practitioners in the cultural sector that the shifting priorities of funding bodies and the competition for resources as a result of the proliferation of combined arts festivals in the UK have caused organisers to bow to financial pressures (Holden, 2006; Quinn, 2005). This emphasis on audience development and economic contribution can be seen to be having a negative impact on unique festival programming and local residents' involvement (Quinn, 2003). This begs the question, why is it not considered good enough for the majority of combined arts festivals to serve the local community? (Mayfield & Crompton, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

This case study is part of a larger research project, which examines social, economic and political impacts of UK arts festivals on communities and places. Methodology for this research includes a 42-question mail-back survey questionnaire sent to 117 arts festivals in the UK in December 2003 and January 2004 to obtain festival demographics, programming history, funding and future plans. The survey sent was adapted from a survey published in a 1992 study conducted by the Policy Studies Institute concerning both single-genre and combined arts festivals in the UK (Rolfe, 1992). The survey was pre-tested on a small group of 10 randomly chosen combined arts festivals and was adapted in accordance with their feedback before being sent to the whole group. The 117 combined arts festivals represent the total number of combined arts festivals in the UK in 2003. A listing of these festivals was compiled from the Arts Council of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland arts festivals lists, as well as the British Arts Festivals Association membership list, European Festivals Association membership list, British Federation of Festivals membership list and International Festivals and Events Association membership list. Contacting local tourist boards and councils across the UK and extensively searching the Internet also helped to formulate an exhaustive list of combined arts festivals in the UK.

The data are based on a 56% response rate. The majority of the major cities in England (Birmingham, Liverpool, and

Nottingham), Scotland (Edinburgh, Glasgow), Wales (Cardiff) and Northern Ireland (Belfast) who have combined arts festivals responded to the survey. The majority of combined arts festivals in Greater London responded; these are primarily organised by local neighbourhoods or councils, as there is no major London-wide combined arts festival. Medium-sized towns and smaller villages around the UK also responded, some of whom have renowned arts festivals, such as Aldeburgh and Harrogate, while others who are not as well known for their arts scenes also responded (Peebles, Orkney). The 51 combined arts festivals that failed to respond are similar in size variation and geographical area to those who did respond.

The data gathered from the returned surveys are analysed by size of festival and by years in existence. Festival size was chosen as a variable to examine to what effect, if any, this factor has on festival content, funding and goals. In terms of size, the festivals were defined as small if the total number of people attending the festival in 2003 was less than 10,000; medium represents 10,000-50,000 attendees; and large is defined as more than 50,000 attendees. Those who did not indicate the total number of attendees on the survey are classified as "unknown" and are included in the analysis under this category. These classification ranges were selected because they corresponded with breaks in the data set. The number of years a festival has been in existence was chosen as a variable to compare approaches to festival organisation and administration. In terms of years in existence, the new festivals are defined as those who have been in existence for less than 10 years. Established festivals are those in existence for 10-30 years, and long established festivals are those in existence for over 30 years. Those who did not indicate the number of years in existence on the survey are classified as "unknown" in the analysis under this category. Univariate analysis (frequency distributions) and Chi-square analysis for categorical data to test for statistical significance were used.

Case studies were selected for this research because they were viewed as the best means to obtain a holistic understanding of cultural systems of action, which are sets of interrelated activities in which actors in a social situation are engaged (Tellis, 1997, p.5). The Lichfield Festival was chosen in order to discern a more in-depth

understanding of the aims and goals, audiences and content influences of a combined arts festival that relies primarily on box office ticket sales to fund itself. A variety of methods were implemented, including face-to-face recorded semi-structured and open-ended interviews with the Lichfield Festival Director and Lichfield Tourism Officers. Informal interviews and casual conversations with festival participants, volunteers and local business people at the festival contributed to the participant observation and recording of the festival experience in a personal research diary (Finkel, 2006).

The Proliferation of UK Combined Arts Festivals

"Now, it's festivals, festivals everywhere. Big ones, small ones, wild ones, silly ones, dutiful ones, pretentious ones, phony ones. Many have lost purpose and direction, not to mention individual profile. Place a potted palm near the box office, double the ticket prices and – whoopee – we have a festival!" (Bernheimer, 2003, p.21)

This quote by Bernheimer (2003, p.21) refers to the recent, rapid proliferation of all types of festivals on a global scale. In the UK, the last two decades have seen an increase in arts festivals, especially at the local town and community level. A study by Rolfe (1992) found that combined arts festivals comprise 40% of all festivals in the UK, and 50% of all existing festivals in the UK originated in the 1980's. One explanation for this is the trend in the 1980's towards the de-centralisation of social issues from the UK central government to local governments (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1994). This can be seen as instrumental in making local social cohesion goals that once typified arts festivals of the late 1960's and 1970's as secondary in importance to the attraction of investment and generation of positive images of place. Community and grass-roots participation became less important to local authorities than the role of prestigious flagship cultural projects and events for image promotion and maximisation of the economic potential of cultural industries and tourism (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1994). Harvey (1989) describes this as a shift towards entrepreneurialism by local authorities. It can be seen that the economic changes of late capitalism have transformed the role of local authorities from predominantly community service-minded entities into entrepreneurial bodies seeking new ways to foster growth and raise the reputation of a place (Harvey, 1989).

Another possible reason for the proliferation of festivals is the recent emphasis on the ability of culture to regenerate and raise the profile of cities. As in the case of Glasgow, arts festivals were central to the city's global image restructuring and acted as a catalyst for cultural development and highlighted the city's cultural industries. Such events were said to be instrumental in helping Glasgow be crowned the European Capital of Culture in 1990 (García, 2003). Indeed, the reputation of arts festivals to help the reputation of cities may be at the crux of their upsurge in numbers.

Arts festivals can help to put cities on the national and international cultural map by highlighting their arts scenes. In many instances, arts festivals are seen as complementary to normal arts programming and can reflect the best of what it has to offer. To become a noted location on the arts circuit, cities need to provide a variety of spectacular cultural and entertainment events for a broad range of audiences. In the past two decades, many cities in the UK, such as Newcastle, Glasgow and Cardiff, have invested in museums, theatres, art houses and other cultural institutions. Combined arts festivals could be viewed as the new cultural 'accessories' for cities because they have the potential to raise cultural profiles and attract international performers. If most major cities have one, then those places without any would stand out and could seem lacking in the cultural world (Parkinson, 2001).

On a smaller scale, combined arts festivals can provide one of the only arts scenes for a place. The increase in popularity for attending arts festivals and the increase in arts festivals appearing in smaller towns and villages around the UK may have to do with the dearth of other cultural events held in those places during the year (Allen and Shaw, 2002). Tim Joss, former Chairman of the British Arts Festivals Association (BAFA) said, "At the local level, many communities would have little or no arts activity but for their festival" (in Allen & Shaw, 2002). It has been shown that 60% of cultural festivals play a role in their communities by running education and community activities and promoting one-off events year round (BAFA, 1994).

Shifting Priorities for Funding

The cultural sector faces a funding landscape that is increasingly competitive (A&B, 2005) due in part to

greater competition, oversupply in the arts market and the increase in the number of other public sector organisations seeking public funding and to partner with businesses (A&B, 2004, p. 2). This veritable flooding of the arts festival landscape has had many effects on the arts festivals themselves. Many organizers feel the market is already saturated, which can often mean closure for smaller festivals because they cannot compete as effectively for resources (Stubbs, 2004). Since Millennium grant giving ended in 2002, the British Arts Councils and many other arts organisations are focusing more on financially supporting sustainable arts festivals. That is, ones they know will survive from year to year due to reputation, popularity and relatively stable funding, which many smaller, newer festivals may not be able to prove. Many organisers of smaller, more locally-minded festivals have become frustrated as a result of the ever increasing restrictions on government grants. For example, an organizer interviewed for this research commented, "You can't do performance anymore – you have to do a project" (Robinson, 2004). This feeling of a lack of direct control over what they are allowed to programme in order to be eligible to receive those grants has led many to abandon government schemes altogether (Gardner, 2006).

There is also an increased emphasis on supporting ethnically-diverse events among public arts organisations. As the Beaminster Festival Director commented in an interview for this research, "They go for new, off-the-wall stuff, heavy on the buzzwords like inclusivity and ethnicity. The more you can use the buzzwords, the more money you can get" (Robinson, 2004). For example, two of the 10 goals of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) have to do with increasing access to the arts and improving social inclusion (Ward, 2001). A Combined Arts Officer at the Arts Council England interviewed for this research stressed that providing support to more social inclusive and ethnically-diverse festivals was a top priority for Arts Councils. The development of Asian meals is one example of the kind of events the Arts Council England is now looking to fund (Laird, 2003). Thus, in order to be competitive and to remain viable for these types of grants combined arts festivals will necessarily need to diversify their arts content to include different ethnic events. This so-called 'diversity by design' focus of many organized arts funding bodies may be leading to a uniformity of design of

contemporary combined arts festivals (Quinn, 2005). For example, if arts festivals know they can get funding by presenting certain types of events, then it is probably those events that will be seen all over the country during festival season.

Interestingly, it has traditionally been the role of the arts to resist this very kind of conformity. These kinds of funding issues raise questions as to whether art is allowed to exist for its own sake in twenty-first century Britain, or if the arts must earn support by becoming a vehicle for organisational strategies and governmental policies. In some respects, the Arts Councils' desire to diversify the arts experience can be seen to be having the opposite effect by limiting funding for general activities and thereby limiting the ability of combined arts festivals to include a broad range of activities, ethnically-focused or otherwise (Brighton, 2006).

Public support was once considered by arts festival organisers to be more favourable than business sponsorship because it allowed the festival to experiment with more creative ideas and to operate without the necessity for as many measurable outcomes (Gardner, 2006). However, the increasing politicisation of arts funding in contemporary Britain has somewhat reversed this trend, and many arts festivals are unable to programme with the luxury of reliable and secure public funding or even manage to get a "foot on the funding ladder" (Gardner, 2006). Combined arts festivals have a responsibility to cover their costs and are increasingly seeking alternative ways to do so in the light of current public funding situations, such as increased competition for funds and restrictive guidelines for eligibility. As public funding becomes more complicated and more uncertain as a primary source of financial support for many combined arts festivals, government funders have encouraged arts organisations to increase their earned income through the box office and retail sales and to seek corporate sponsorship (Caust, 2003, p.55). However, the pursuit of these private methods of funding can also be seen to be having an impact on the programming decisions and operations of combined arts festivals. It is suggested that the main factors affecting many combined arts festivals as they enter into the arena of private support are: increasing competition for funds, potential loss of creative control over programming, increasingly

target-driven approaches to operations and increasing commercialisation of the festival.

If a festival does not garner (enough) government subsidy, it has three main options in order to raise funds: box office ticket sales, business sponsorship and personal donations. Many arts festivals rely on a combination of all three sources in order to cover costs. It can be seen that the arts in the UK on the whole have been relying more on funds from the private sector in recent years. The survey conducted for this research found that business sponsorship is the private source upon which most combined arts festivals rely. This is not necessarily surprising, as it is possible to raise more funding from commercial methods than from individual sources, such as donations and Friends memberships. Along with public and private funding, self-funding through ticket sales is also utilised by the majority of combined arts festivals surveyed (Finkel, 2006). It is suggested that one of the reasons arts organisations and arts festivals have been increasingly thinking in business terms and holding themselves accountable to business standards is the influence of private sponsors and their desire to get a 'return' on their investment (Arendt, 2005).

Financial responsibility can often make arts festivals more accountable to external agents rather than to potential local beneficiaries. Yet, some arts administrators feel such sponsorship is a welcome support for the arts given the ongoing cuts in government funding. Others find it is difficult when sponsors want arts organisations to be run as effectively as businesses. However, many agree that business sponsorship pressures are not as awkward as regulations set out for sustaining state subsidies and exert less editorial influence than government funding bodies (Arendt, 2005). Competition for resources can be seen to be having a selective process on arts festivals because those that are appealing to funders are becoming the victors. This may lead to the stifling of creativity and innovation among smaller local festivals because of the "prescriptive requirements of funding agencies on the one hand, and the need to generate commercial income in a competitive marketplace on the other" (Foley, 1996, p. 204).

Contributions to the Local Economy

Traditionally, it has been the role of combined arts festivals to expose audiences to a variety of art forms not

regularly showcased throughout the year and to celebrate local identities based on the uniqueness of place (Quinn, 2005, p.936). However, partially due to financial pressures, combined arts festivals now must struggle with "the tensions posed by trying to balance deep-rooted, socially aligned artistic goals on the one hand with often conflicting economic imperatives on the other" (Quinn, 2005, p.934). This may be one of the reasons that many combined arts festival organisers are starting to view helping the local economy as one of their main roles. They justify public and private expenditure on their arts festivals by delivering tangible economic results. Some of the other reasons for this prioritisation could be due to council pressures (despite decreased funding), growth coalition partnerships and generally adopted instrumental philosophies in the UK at this time which value economic outcomes from arts provision (see Florida, 2002; Holden, 2006).

Instead of valuing unique celebrations of the local, it emerged from the interviews for this research that many combined arts festival organizers harbour ambitions to attract larger audiences to aid in revenue generation. Some aim to expand beyond their current audiences because they feel local festivals are not attractive to funders (Parr, 2004). Many combined arts festival organizers often justify their festivals based on quantitative figures, such as tourist numbers, economic contributions to place and column inches from publicity campaigns. They often feel compelled to sell their festivals with these statistics to improve their financial prospects (Parr, 2004). This not only involves becoming more attractive to funding bodies, but also includes the simple mathematics involved in reliance on box office sales. They require more people to buy tickets to become more economically viable. A commercialised cycle of sustainability has the potential to be set into motion where the better the reputation of the festival (and the place where it takes place), the greater the possibilities for cultural tourists to buy tickets to festival events. This then means more money can be invested in providing better performances for the next year, which may lead to even more tickets sales, and so forth. This often transforms the festival into something else entirely – a commercialised marketing tool, both for itself and its host locality.

Often, the festival and the town share a branding relationship, which means that boosting the reputation of

one helps the reputation of the other (Prentice & Andersen, 2003). Some second-tier combined arts festival directors aspire to have the name of their host locality closely associated with their festival, as is already the case with Edinburgh, in order to exhibit status and financial viability (Bowen, 2004). This potential symbiotic relationship between place and festival can be seen to be based on a mutual desire for branding within the context of managerial cultural policies developed since the 1980s (Lee, 2005). Arts and events are often incorporated into municipal strategies to further place marketing priorities adopted by local governments, which aim to demonstrate desirability based on image and perception (Voase, 1997). It can be argued that it is not only local authorities who are being entrepreneurial in light of recent economic restructuring, as Harvey (1989) suggested, but also some festival organisers are responding to the changes and challenges by attempting to reposition their festivals to align with instrumental priorities.

However, many of these ambitions do not go according to plan. When combined arts festivals prioritise generating revenue and are organised principally for financial gain, the programming, objectives and outcomes of the festival are affected. In order to achieve these enterprising goals, many combined arts festivals set out to emulate the design, programming and strategies of larger and long-established arts festivals, such as Aldeburgh and Edinburgh, who already draw extensive international audiences and make significant contributions to local business services (Bowen, 2004). Although they are looking to position themselves as front-runners in the market, this emulation technique does not set them apart from the potentially dozens of other festivals in their areas. The disparities between some organisers' ambitious plans and many festivals' reality highlight the lack of effective responses by most combined arts festivals to competitive positioning, commercialisation pressures and market differentiation.

As illustrated in the following case study of the Lichfield Festival, this type of economic- and image-minded ambition often has the reverse effect of producing uninteresting and unoriginal programming and a lack of real connection with the local community.

Lichfield Festival: A Case of Compromise

Lichfield is approximately 20 miles outside of Birmingham in the Midlands. The Director of the Lichfield Festival from 2001-2005, and the main interviewee for this research, has a background in arts programming administration and writes on classical music topics for well-established magazines and newspapers, such as *The Guardian*. The Lichfield Festival began a little over twenty years ago because the Dean of the Lichfield Cathedral organised cultural events before people left for the summer holidays. The festival has grown since then, but the cathedral is still a focus of the arts festival. The festival is held for 10 days in the beginning of July. Other venues are also used for festival events, including the new Garrick Theatre in the centre of Lichfield and 15 other venues including parks, schools and so forth.

Programming is done by the Festival Director and targets mainly classical music, jazz and world music aficionados. Audiences are substantially Anglo, upper middle class and over 50. This fits the description of the majority of Lichfield residents. According to the festival director, there is more ethnic diversity in towns nearby, but the festival has not been successful in attracting those communities despite its attempts with what he terms a 'cosmopolitan' programme. The director says that getting ethnic communities, younger people and tourists to come is a top priority (Bowen, 2004).

The audience for the Lichfield Festival is 90-95% local (within 25-30 mile radius). Programming is done by the director and targets mainly classical music, jazz and world music aficionados. Audiences are substantially white, upper middle class and over 50. This reflects the demographic of the majority of Lichfield residents. According to the director, there is a more ethnic diverse population in towns nearby, but the festival has not been successful in attracting those communities despite its attempts with what he terms a 'cosmopolitan' programme. He says that getting ethnic communities, younger people and tourists to come is a top priority (Bowen, 2004).

There is also an active drive by the director to increase the reputation of the Lichfield Festival and the town itself. The idea is to leverage the festival to make the town more of a recognised 'destination' and not just a passing-through point on the way to some place more interesting. He feels the festival can help the town to retain visitors,

who would be 'captive' for ten days during the festival (Bowen, 2004). However, Lichfield is not often mentioned in the media, nor does it have a reputation for having an arts scene. Indeed, the county of Staffordshire, on the whole, has a poor reputation for the arts and scored a zero out of 10 on a Country Life survey for sport and arts (in BBC News, 2003). Through programming mainstream fare with the hope that it will sell out venues and attract more people, the director can be seen to be focused on marketing the dual package of arts festival and town in an attempt to put Lichfield "on the map like Aldeburgh" (Bowen, 2004). It is uncertain whether or not this can be achieved in reality, as standard arts festival events, such as Liverpool Symphony Orchestra concerts and Jazz Jamaica All Stars performances, may make local news but are doubtful to be deemed newsworthy on a national scale. Additionally, financial concerns contribute to the difficulty for the Lichfield Festival to produce something truly newsworthy.

Interestingly, the Lichfield Festival relies on 6-7% ACE funding, 6-7% district council funding, 40% personal donations and the remaining 46-48% comes from ticket sales (Bowen, 2004). This means that the festival is not chiefly financially accountable to the local council and is therefore not under pressure to assist them to achieve socio-economic targets. However, the director still adopts an instrumental view of the festival's worth and expresses the necessity for it to help contribute to the town's economy. The director explains how local audiences go home after the performance, and in greater economic terms, they are not contributing to the local economy. He regards the quantifiable economic benefits of people eating in local restaurants and staying in local accommodation as almost more important than what he terms as 'the vague cultural benefits', or less quantifiable value of arts in the community (Bowen, 2004). This emphasis on economic development may be linked to the increase in status and reputation that both the city and festival would achieve as a result of it. By addressing branding ambitions over audience needs, the festival could be in danger of losing its meaning for locals.

The field note extract below (Figure 1) is an excerpt of the author's personal research diary of attendance at the Lichfield Festival, which demonstrates a disparity between personal experience and the rhetoric of the

Lichfield Festival website, brochure and director's expressed aims.

Figure 1: Research Diary 1 (July, Friday day)

Immediately I notice the lack of posters, banners or any other signs announcing there is a festival going on here. It looks like a normal day in an upper middle class town. People are shopping in the name-brand stores in the city centre and congregating in franchised pubs and restaurants. There is a distinct lack of festival buzz and vibrancy. I am a little taken aback, to be honest, as I expected the festival to be a big deal here. What led me to believe this was the professional-looking glossy brochure and the website that promised great things. This could just be good marketing, however, and I am interested to see if my expectations from all the hype are going to be fulfilled.

Our B&B proprietor welcomed us and gave us their last room, as they had no more vacancies for the week. He said this was due to the festival, but it was mostly performers staying here. He guessed most hotels would have more performers than visitors who had come expressly for the festival, as he thought mostly locals attend events. Some visitors come to Lichfield this time of year, he said, but they are mostly interested in the cathedral and are not explicitly here for the festival. He made it clear that the festival was welcomed by music and performing arts enthusiasts in Lichfield, as high quality performers do not often make this a stop on their tours. A visit to nearby Birmingham was the main cultural outlet during the rest of the year. This is why, he said, the Liverpool Symphony Orchestra concerts were sold out "even when they were charging £31 for a ticket."

The main stress of the festival is to sell tickets in order to be able to cover costs and at least partially fund the next year's festival. This makes programming a more commercialised activity, and thus, it tends to focus on mainstream and popular artists and events. As the director comments, "We would love the financial safety net to allow more adventurous content and not care if only 10 people were there. But obscure stuff doesn't make the money. And the real world doesn't work like that" (Bowen, 2004). Of the 61 events that comprised the 2003 festival, 27 (44%) were music and 13 (21%) were films. Drama (7 events) and visual arts (5 events) also featured in the festival programme. It is interesting to note that although Bowen insists the festival is trying to reach out to youth and minorities, according to the survey results, children's activities and street performances only make up 5% of the festival's content with one fireworks display, one stilt walking performance and one dedicated children's activity in total. Only 11 festival activities were free, which means audiences have to pay to attend 82%

of the events. This may be due to the pressures of festival finances and budgets, which makes the expressed desire to develop new audiences more difficult to achieve in actuality. Also, the festival will often collaborate with other festivals in the region to pay for a tour of a famous artist. However, this could foil the desire to draw audiences from further afield, as a special trip would be unnecessary for those who could see the same act closer to home. These are a few factors that may be contributing to the widening gap between organiser ambition and the reality of finances and programming.

The Lichfield Festival not only competes with other festivals in the region that take place in early July, such as the Warwick & Leamington Festival and Cheltenham Music & Fringe Festival. These arts festivals can be considered in direct competition with the Lichfield Festival for cultural audiences, as they occur in the same region and many feature similar arts events and entertainment. Also, such festivals also compete with other forms of entertainment taking place in the area. The addition of the Garrick Theatre in Lichfield has increased the number of cultural events in the town throughout the year, and the festival now seeks to distinguish itself from their schedule. Perhaps due to the budgetary restrictions, this is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve.

With regard to the Lichfield Festival, it is suggested that the organisers have aspirational place marketing and commercial goals in mind, as many of the festival activities reflect an emphasis on selling. This includes both the literal selling of tickets for festival events as well as the figurative selling of the image and heritage of the town itself. However, the success of such efforts is questionable, as illustrated the author's field note extract below (Figure 2), which recounts the atmosphere of one of the few free events at the festival.

Figure 2: Research Diary (July, Saturday day)

One of the few free attractions of the festival, the Medieval Market, is held on the grounds of the Lichfield Cathedral during the day on Saturday. Arts and crafts stalls line the green around the cathedral. There appears to be more people selling than buying. Out of nowhere, a procession of men and women in uniformed fancy dress parade around the stalls, brandishing deer antlers and blowing bubbles. Nobody seems to know who they are or what group they represent. Their procession seems more random than festive. A stage is set up in front of the cathedral with musicians to entertain the handful of picnickers

on the lawn. Some flyers are handed out promoting a visit to the home of Charles Darwin's grandfather. A bit of a stretch for place marketing, no?

The Lichfield Festival is a mainly locally-attended festival that apparently seeks to extend its reputation and audience base through commercial methods. However, Greenwood (1989) argues that the commercialisation of culture is fundamentally destructive because it leads to a loss of meaning and a disengagement from the local. The field note extract below by the author (Figure 3) supports Greenwood's argument by illustrating the lack of originality and connection with locality of many of the festival events, which contributes to an overall vacuous festival experience.

Figure 3: Research Diary (July, Friday and Saturday nights)

Our first night, we opt for a cheaper activity and get tickets to see a film showing in a local high school. But even though this is one of the less expensive and more 'popular' festival events, we are still the youngest people in the auditorium. The pub we went to afterwards for dinner was filled with younger people, so they do exist here after all.

We attend an event in the Garrick Theatre, which opened this year. I find the building to be rather overtly modern and ostentatious. It took them two years to build it, and it obviously has increased the amount of cultural activity to be found here. There are a lot of glossy marketing paraphernalia surrounding festival and other theatre events in the foyer. Someone is obviously throwing money at the arts here, but I'm not sure what that's achieving. It seems Lichfield is trying to jump onto the national and international arts circuit, and the festival is the proverbial trampoline they hope will launch them.

The lack of real buzz surrounding the festival and rather mainstream and unexciting events left me unimpressed. One doesn't expect to be bored during a festival, and I analysed why I was feeling this way. In my opinion, there does not appear to be a 'heart and soul' of this festival. What I mean by this is a distinguishable element that is tied in with the unique qualities of the place. I think it comes down to the fact that I don't want to 'consume a product'. I want to enjoy a unique and memorable experience. We ended our trip early and drove back to London via Warwick, where there was yet another combined arts festival taking place. It was another of these commercialised ventures where they charge a fair amount for tickets to the good stuff and set off free fireworks to get everyone in the mood. At least they had bunting and posters throughout the town to add some flair. It seems to me that these sorts of festivals are much of a muchness really.

The Lichfield Festival is representative of many festivals whose business sponsorship and arts council funding has decreased over time, thus making it more reliant on ticket sales for income. The best it can hope for is to break even each year or perhaps make a small surplus to put towards next year's activities. This need to sell tickets has led to the necessity of presenting mainstream and crowd-pleasing events. This reality conflicts with the desire of the organisers to build a reputation as a quality arts production with innovative programming. Also due to the need to generate revenue, ticket prices to Lichfield Festival events are rather high, thereby possibly excluding the youth and ethnic minority audiences the director says he aims to attract.

Although it often causes a festival to have unoriginal content and high ticket prices, achieving box office success can often have a more positive outcome for the festival director. It could be argued that Lichfield was a stepping stone for the director, who as of 2005 is the new head of programming for Aldeburgh Productions. This use of one festival as a training ground to prove oneself and move up the festival hierarchy may be one of the reasons certain festivals exceed their briefs. In this case, it can be seen that the personal ambition of the director may have had an influence on the programming of the Lichfield Festival by attempting to make it more than what it is in reality - a festival for local arts devotees.

It can be concluded that financial pressures are one of the main reasons causing the Lichfield Festival to 'play it safe' with programming and no longer commission new work. The organisers may feel they need to pursue more aspirant business-oriented strategies in order to remain in existence from year-to-year and to be considered professionally successful. However, it is not only Lichfield organisers who have been making these kinds of choices and dealing with these kinds of pressures. More and more combined arts festivals in the UK are adopting commercial methods and commercially-minded philosophies. As a result, many can be seen to be becoming increasingly similar to each other.

On the Path to Commercialisation, Standardisation and Homogenisation

It is argued by the author that the increasing dependence on commercialised methods is leading to the standardisation of arts festival format and homogenisation

of programming content throughout the UK. It is concluded by the author that one of the reasons for this increasing arts festival conformity is a result of organisers' aims to increase audience numbers and achieve wider tourism and economic development goals. However, very few achieve such goals, and many neglect local audiences and local communities in the process of trying to do so.

The proliferation of combined arts festivals on a local level has meant that people are spoiled for choice in attending such events. In many cases, people will not travel long distances to an arts festival if they can get a similar experience in their own towns. Many international artists are expensive to hire and a group of arts festivals will often collaborate and set up a tour for such acts to perform at a number of festivals in the area, making a special trip unnecessary for attendees. Aside from the most well known arts festivals, the majority do not have the kind of pulling power that a rock festival or film festival has.

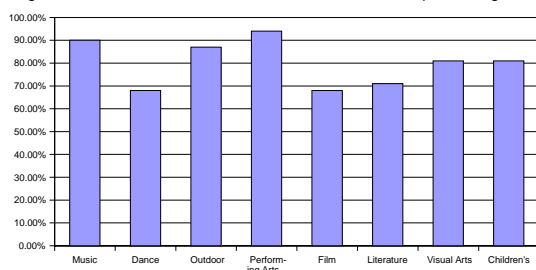
Thus, the majority of UK combined arts festivals are local affairs. The average festival audience, according to 66 survey respondents from this research, is composed predominantly of local residents (75%), and a few (16%) regional visitors, visitors from around the UK (6%) and international visitors (3%). It is interesting to note that many festival organizers did not know what percentage of their audiences were international visitors, but almost all knew how many locals were there. This may be because local community involvement can be the lifeblood of an arts festival. Almost all survey respondents depend on community volunteers and donations to help organize, promote and administrate the festival both during the festival and throughout the year. However, when asked if festival programming was designed to attract tourists to the festival, more than half of all respondents answered affirmatively.

The tension between these ambitions and the reality of their festival environments may be the main issue driving many festivals to commercialize and homogenize their content. Instead of more realistically tailoring programmes to suit local audiences or making their programmes unique to draw a niche following, many arts festivals are quixotically trying to become all things to all people and, by doing so, are in danger of losing their individuality. If

organizers are trying to attract tourists and develop audiences, why do they seem to be doing the same things? On the whole, contemporary combined arts festival organizers are less willing to take risks with their programs in order to sell tickets, build audience figures and get publicity.

Although some festival organizers spice up the content with a few events that may be considered out of the ordinary for the local population, such as world music or Afro-Caribbean rhythm & blues, many organizers can be seen to be taking few chances overall. Perhaps this is a reason why many combined arts festivals are becoming increasingly similar. It is argued that a generic combined arts festival 'type' can be seen to be developing based on the successes of a few large, long-established festivals. What is note-worthy about the survey results collected about programming is a majority of combined arts festivals include and exclude the same types of events. The majority of programming content consists primarily of all types of music, drama, poetry, fine arts exhibitions, kid's events, still walkers and outdoor performance arts, a fireworks display and a Caribbean parade. This makes the contemporary landscape of combined arts festivals in the UK appear homogeneous. Figure 4 shows the percentage of combined arts festivals that include various genres of arts in their programming content.

Figure 4: Events included in combined arts festivals (percentage)



Source: (Finkel, 2006)

It is argued that this move towards increasing standardisation could be detrimental to smaller, more traditional local festivals as competition for resources increases, potentially leading to a loss of place-based individuality for combined arts festivals in the UK and an increasing uniformity of cultural forms presented.

CONCLUSIONS

Although public and private arts organisations, such as Arts Council and Arts and Business, aim to financially assist arts festivals by emphasising the necessity of adopting commercialised methods and by facilitating partnerships with commercial companies, it is argued that the increasing dependence on commercialised methods for funding are partially responsible for the increasing conformity of contemporary UK combined arts festivals. At this moment in the UK, festivals can be seen to be a strong sector, but they are under-resourced (Parr, 2004). It is suggested that instead of pursuing ambitious audience development and marketing plans that attempt to emulate top-tier arts festivals, it would be more beneficial to individual arts festivals and the sector on the whole if organisers focused on strengthening their festivals from within and doing a better job with what they have in place already.

For example, for those combined arts festivals which primarily rely on revenue from selling tickets through the festival box office, the emphasis on programming often shifts from aesthetics to popularity. This usually means making content choices based on sale potential rather than cultural adventurousness. The case study of the Lichfield Festival examines the compromises made in order to balance finances and aesthetics. Lichfield Festival also has very little content embedded in the local community in an effort to sell out its box office, which makes it almost devoid of meaning to the town.

The data for this study found that the majority of contemporary combined arts festivals in the UK exist on a local level. However, there is a disparity between what most of these festivals are, and what organisers would like them to be. Such aspirations for arts festivals are often tied into instrumental agendas, which have roots in budget concerns. In an effort to build reputations to draw more attendees with the hopes of receiving more public and private financial support, most combined arts festivals can be seen to be conforming to a similar model based on the successes of larger, longer-established arts festivals. Cohen (1988) warns against the 'dangers' of increasing standardisation when markets are expanded due to commercialisation. As more and more arts festivals crowd the market and there is increasing competition for resources, it is possible that only those festivals that fulfil local governments', arts organisations'

or business sponsors' goals will have a future. This, as Belfiore (2002, p.91) argues, "...degrades the function of the arts to a mere tool. Arts become a matter of 'value for money'." These kinds of instrumental policies and practices have been argued to devalue the content of the arts and ignore their educational contributions and worth in non-financial terms (Heartfield, 2005; Mirza, 2006; Selwood, 2002). It is suggested by the author that a move by funders to valuing and supporting the arts for their aesthetics and originality may be an influential first step in re-empowering local arts festivals to take achievable risks and restore connections with local populations.

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